



CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN IMPLEMENTING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT SAFETY POLICY IN INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN BANJARMASIN AND BANJARBARU

Ikta Yarliani¹, Dyah Ageng Pramesty Koenarso²

^{1,2}Program Studi PIAUD, UIN Antasari Banjarmasin

e- mail: iktayarliani@uin-antasari.ac.id¹, dyah-ageng@uin-antasari.ac.id²

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Abstract

Inclusive early childhood education (ECED) ensures all children, including those with special needs, have access to a safe learning environment. This study examines the implementation of safety policies in inclusive ECED institutions in Banjarmasin and Banjarbaru using a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and observations, following stages of participant selection, interviews, transcription, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Findings indicate that while safety policies are implemented, challenges remain in infrastructure, teacher training, and community awareness. Limited resources, inadequate facilities, and low parental understanding hinder inclusivity. However, teacher training and policy adaptation have improved inclusive practices. To enhance implementation, stronger government support is needed in funding, regulations, and public awareness. Key recommendations include (1) allocating budgets for inclusive infrastructure, (2) mandating specialized teacher training, (3) integrating community engagement programs, and (4) establishing monitoring mechanisms. These measures can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Keywords: Safety Policy; Learning Environment; Inclusive Education; Early Childhood

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is a key foundation in the development of children's character, cognitive and social skills. Education at this stage is crucial as early childhood is considered a golden period in a child's development, where the learning and experiences gained at this age will shape the child's personality and abilities in the future. Inclusive early childhood education, which integrates children with special needs into mainstream education settings, is an important part of efforts to provide equitable and fair education for all children. However, the implementation of inclusive early childhood education in Indonesia, particularly in Banjarmasin City and Banjarbaru, faces various challenges, one of which is the learning environment security policy. Safety in the learning environment includes not only physical aspects such as safe infrastructure, but also

psychological and social aspects, including how children with special needs are accepted by their peers, and how teachers and school staff can properly manage an inclusive classroom (Azzahra et al., 2022; Hayes & Bulat, 2017). In Banjarmasin and Banjarbaru, as developing cities, there are gaps in the implementation of this policy. Although the government has issued various regulations related to inclusive education, its implementation in the field is often not optimal. One of the main issues is the lack of understanding and awareness from stakeholders about the importance of a safe learning environment in inclusive early childhood education (Yasa et al., 2023). In addition, there are differences in infrastructure and resources between urban and rural schools, further widening the gap in policy implementation.

Learning environment safety emphasizes creating physically and emotionally safe learning spaces. According to Liu et al., (2024) microenvironments, which include schools and homes, significantly influence children's development. For inclusive early childhood education, learning environment safety involves adapting school infrastructure to accommodate children with special needs and training teachers and staff to handle inclusion effectively (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). Inclusive education is not just about enrolling children with special needs in mainstream settings but ensuring they receive adequate support to succeed (UNICEF, 2019). This requires strong policies that guarantee both physical and emotional safety. However, in Indonesia, there is a significant gap between policy and implementation. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology reported that while 80% of schools claim to support inclusive education, only 35% have adapted their infrastructure, and less than 40% of teachers have received inclusion training (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Research by Sari et al. (2022) highlights that many ECED institutions lack proper learning spaces, leading to exclusionary practices despite national policies promoting inclusion. Additionally, UNICEF (2021) report found that over 60% of early childhood centers in Indonesia lack adequate accessibility features, such as ramps, sensory learning tools, and specialized teaching strategies. This indicates that while inclusion policies exist, they are not effectively enforced due to funding constraints, lack of teacher training, and minimal community awareness. Understanding safety policies in ECED requires a broader education policy framework, considering how they are formulated, implemented, and evaluated. Policy implementation is a critical phase in the policy cycle as it determines whether regulations translate into practical improvements (Bertram & Pascal, 2016). Addressing policy-practice gaps requires systematic monitoring, stronger financial support, and increased professional development programs for educators.

Research on safe learning environments in inclusive early childhood education is relatively new and growing. Internationally, many studies have examined the importance of safe and inclusive learning environments for children with special needs. However, in Indonesia, research is limited, especially in the context of inclusive early childhood education in cities such as Banjarmasin and Banjarbaru. Most of the existing research focuses more on aspects of inclusion in general, such as how children with special needs can be integrated into regular classes. Research on learning environment safety in this context is often only a sub-theme of larger research on inclusion. For example, research conducted by Djone & Suryani, (2019) on the challenges and opportunities of inclusive early childhood education in Indonesia mentions learning environment safety as one of the important issues, but it is not the main focus. On the other hand, some studies highlight the importance of teacher and staff training in creating safe and inclusive

learning environments. Research by Hata et al., (2023) found that one of the biggest obstacles in the implementation of inclusive early childhood education in Indonesia is the lack of training for teachers on how to handle children with special needs, which ultimately impacts on the safety and comfort of the learning environment.

Despite a number of relevant studies, there are significant gaps in the literature related to the implementation of learning environment safety policies in inclusive early childhood education, especially in cities such as Banjarmasin and Banjarbaru. One of the main gaps is the lack of research that examines specifically how learning environment safety policies are implemented in the context of inclusive early childhood education. Most studies only address the issue in general terms, without providing in-depth analyses of the challenges and strategies used by schools to create safe and inclusive environments. In addition, there is a gap in the research on the role of local government and local stakeholders in supporting the implementation of this policy. Most of the existing research focuses on the national level, whereas education policies, including safety in inclusive ECD, are often implemented with different approaches in each region. There is also a lack of research linking physical and psychological safety in learning environments. Many studies still separate these two aspects, whereas in the context of inclusive early childhood education, they are interrelated and should be addressed holistically.

Despite various studies on inclusive education in Indonesia, most research has primarily focused on access to education and curriculum adaptation rather than the safety of the learning environment (Djone & Suryani, 2019; Sari et al., 2022). While existing policies emphasize inclusivity, many early childhood education institutions still lack proper infrastructure, trained educators, and community support to create truly safe learning spaces (Kemendikbudristek, 2023; UNICEF, 2021). Studies by Hayes & Bulat (2017) and Fajri & Jauhari (2024) highlight that the implementation of safety policies in inclusive schools remains inconsistent, particularly due to funding limitations and gaps in teacher training.

Given these challenges, a more context-specific analysis is needed to understand how learning environment safety policies are implemented in different regions. This research aims to bridge that gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of how safety policies are applied in inclusive early childhood education (ECED) institutions in Banjarmasin and Banjarbaru. Using a case study approach, this study will explore both physical and psychological safety aspects and how they interact in fostering an inclusive learning environment. Additionally, it will examine the role of local governments in supporting these institutions, particularly in teacher training and resource provision, to identify best practices and areas for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore how learning environment safety policies are implemented in inclusive early childhood education (ECED) institutions. This approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of key stakeholders, particularly principals and teachers, who are directly involved in ensuring inclusive and safe learning environments. The study focused on inclusive ECED institutions in Banjarmasin and Banjarbaru. The selection of research sites followed a purposive sampling method, ensuring that only institutions officially recognized as inclusive and actively implementing inclusive

programs were included. A total of 20 ECED institutions met these criteria and agreed to participate. Institutions that lacked formal inclusion programs or had minimal engagement in safety policy implementation were excluded to maintain the study's relevance. From these institutions, 40 participants were selected, comprising 20 principals and 20 teachers. The principals were chosen for their role in policy implementation and institutional management, while teachers were included due to their direct interaction with children with special needs. These participants provided valuable insights into both the administrative and practical aspects of learning environment safety in inclusive education settings.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observations. The interviews explored participants' perspectives on the implementation of safety policies, the challenges faced, and strategies employed to create inclusive learning spaces. In parallel, policy documents, including government regulations, school safety guidelines, and institutional reports, were examined to assess how well policy objectives align with actual practices. Field observations provided additional context by examining classroom arrangements, accessibility features, and teacher-student interactions. The study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for data interpretation. The process began with transcribing interviews and field notes, followed by coding to identify recurring themes related to policy implementation. These themes were then analyzed to reveal patterns in participant narratives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and best practices in ensuring a safe and inclusive learning environment. To strengthen the credibility and validity of findings, data triangulation was used by cross-referencing interview responses with policy documents and field observations. Additionally, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to ensure accuracy, while peer debriefing was employed to minimize researcher bias through discussions with fellow academics.

A key aspect of the research was the comparative analysis of policy documents, which involved evaluating gaps between policy frameworks and their real-world application. This analysis highlighted inconsistencies in policy enforcement and identified areas where additional government support or institutional intervention is needed. By integrating multiple data sources and employing rigorous qualitative analysis, this study provides an in-depth exploration of the realities of learning environment safety policies in inclusive ECED institutions. The findings contribute to a greater understanding of the successes, limitations, and potential improvements in ensuring safe and inclusive early childhood education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding of the Learning Environment Safety Policy

The understanding of the learning environment safety policy in inclusive early childhood education is well recognized by principals and educators. The principal emphasized that this policy is not only concerned with physical safety aspects, such as protecting children from potential physical harm, but also includes emotional safety for children with special needs (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). In her interview, the principal stated, *"This policy is not just to ensure that children are not physically hurt, but more importantly, they feel emotionally safe. Children with special needs often have greater challenges adapting to new environments, so we try to create an atmosphere that supports them to learn and play calmly."* This statement shows that the principal has a broad understanding of this

policy, which includes both dimensions of physical and emotional safety and recognizes that both are crucial to creating an optimal learning environment for children with special needs.

On the other hand, educators gave a more focused view on the implementation of the policy in the context of daily teaching. Educators explained that this policy serves as a guide to create a comfortable and inclusive space for all children, especially those with special needs. In an interview, an educator said, *“We have to adjust our teaching methods so that every child feels cared for and can actively participate. For example, children who need more attention are given extra time or special tools so that they can follow the lesson well.”* This indicates that educators not only understand the policy in terms of the importance of creating a safe space, but also in terms of teaching strategies that need to be adapted to the needs of each child. An inclusive approach to teaching is a key element in their understanding of the policy (Grimes, 2014).

Principals and educators share a common understanding of the learning environment safety policy, but their focus differs. Principals emphasize aspects of physical and emotional safety to create a supportive environment for all children, especially those with special needs. They view this policy as a comprehensive guideline that plays a role in establishing a safe and welcoming atmosphere and understanding the challenges that children who have difficulty adapting may face (Cardona & Rodríguez, 2023). Educators, however, focus more on the practical application of this policy in the classroom by customizing teaching methods and providing individualized support so that every child, without exception, can actively participate in learning. While principals prioritize institutional environmental safety, educators prioritize daily pedagogical adjustments, such as providing extra time or using specialized tools to meet each child's unique needs. These differences demonstrate the importance of a holistic approach to understanding safety and inclusivity policies that include environmental as well as instructional aspects that are essential to effective early childhood education (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020; Bendini & Devercelli, 2022).

Implementation of the Learning Environment Safety Policy

The implementation of the learning environment safety policy in inclusive early childhood education involves various efforts aimed at creating a safe and inclusive environment for children, especially children with special needs (Hata et al., 2023; Hayes & Bulat, 2017). The principal explained that one of the concrete steps that has been taken is to organise special training for teachers so that they can understand and implement the policy properly. In addition, the school is also trying to adjust the playground facilities to make them safer and more accessible for all children, including children with special needs. The principal added, *‘We have organised training for teachers so that they can better understand the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment. We also try to adjust the playground facilities, but there are still some facilities that do not meet the standards we expect.’* This statement shows that despite the efforts to create a safe environment, there are still limitations in the facilities that must be improved for this policy to be implemented optimally.

On the other hand, educators are also actively involved in the implementation of this policy by making various adjustments in teaching and learning activities. For example, educators use special tools for children with special needs so that they can better participate in activities. One educator revealed, *‘We use tools such as pictures,*

educational toys and other media for children with special needs so that they can follow the lessons more easily. We also often have to improvise due to the limited equipment available.’ This shows that educators go to great lengths to ensure that every child, without exception, can have a fun and rewarding learning experience, despite limited facilities being a major obstacle (Barrett et al., 2019).

However, the implementation of this policy still has obstacles. The main obstacle is the limited facilities and resources available. Although schools and educators have made various efforts, such as teacher training and the use of assistive devices, the reality on the ground shows a gap between the existing policy and the conditions faced (Fajri & Jauhari, 2024). As explained by principals and educators, limited facilities, such as inadequate classrooms and limited teaching aids, make the implementation of this policy not fully optimal. Therefore, both principals and educators recognise the need for additional support from the government and other related parties to meet the needs for more adequate facilities. Principal K concluded, *‘We need more support from the government and related parties so that the existing facilities can meet the required standards, so that this policy can be implemented better.’* This indicates that despite the efforts of schools and educators, external support is needed to make the implementation of this policy more effective and comprehensive.

In implementing the learning environment safety policy, principals and educators take several key actions, though they encounter significant challenges. One crucial effort is teacher training, where principals organize special sessions to help educators understand and apply the policy effectively. Educators then integrate this knowledge into their teaching practices by making necessary adjustments. However, training resources and time constraints limit the implementation depth, highlighting the need for continuous professional development and additional training opportunities. Another significant initiative is adjusting playground facilities to ensure a safer and more accessible environment for children with special needs. While principals oversee these adjustments at the institutional level, educators make modifications within classrooms by using available tools and improvising. Nevertheless, the lack of adequate facilities and accessibility features remains a challenge, necessitating external funding and support for necessary upgrades. The use of assistive devices is another vital aspect of policy implementation. Principals support educators in utilizing specialized tools, while educators incorporate educational toys, pictures, and other media to enhance learning for children with diverse needs. However, shortages in assistive devices often require educators to improvise, emphasizing the need for increased provision of specialized teaching tools and equipment.

Despite these efforts, both principals and educators acknowledge general obstacles that hinder the full implementation of the policy. Principals recognize limitations in facilities and resources, while educators struggle to deliver fully inclusive lessons due to inadequate tools and space. Insufficient resources, such as classrooms and teaching aids, further complicate the process. To address these barriers, increased governmental and external support is essential to ensure that facility standards align with the needs of inclusive early childhood education (Cardona & Rodríguez, 2023).

Challenges in Implementing the Learning Environment Safety Policy

The biggest challenge in implementing the learning environment safety policy in inclusive early childhood education is the limited budget and facilities (Mwaipopo et al.,

2021). Despite efforts to improve infrastructure, many schools still lack accessible classrooms, adaptive equipment, and sensory-friendly learning materials. Principal M stated, *"We have tried to provide appropriate facilities, but many classrooms and equipment still do not meet the needs of children with special needs. Government support is available, but it is often insufficient to fulfill all requirements."* This reflects how financial constraints directly impact the creation of a safe and inclusive learning environment, limiting schools' ability to provide adequate accommodations for children with disabilities.

Beyond financial and infrastructure limitations, challenges within the policy system and technical support mechanisms also hinder effective implementation. Many inclusive ECED institutions struggle with unclear policy guidelines, leading to inconsistencies in how safety regulations are enforced at the school level. Several principals noted that while national policies promote inclusion, local adaptations often lack specific implementation frameworks, leaving schools uncertain about how to align their practices with national regulations. Additionally, limited technical support, such as inadequate teacher training programs and a lack of professional development opportunities, exacerbates difficulties in maintaining inclusive and safe learning environments. Educator F said, *"We often encounter parents who do not fully understand that children with special needs need a different approach. Some of them feel that these children should be able to follow learning like other children without any special adjustments. This makes us need to explain the inclusive policy and approach repeatedly."* This shows that social challenges, especially in terms of education and the community's understanding of children with special needs, contribute to barriers to implementing inclusive learning environment security policies (Sari et al., 2022).

Table 3. Indicators of Challenges in Implementing the Learning Environment Safety Policy in Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Challenge Indicator	Challenges Faced by Principals	Challenges Faced by Educators
Budget and Facility Limitations	Limited budget is a major obstacle in providing appropriate facilities for children with special needs. Facilities and infrastructure are not fully adequate.	Directly impacted by a lack of special equipment to support learning activities for children with special needs in the classroom.
Non-Standard Facilities	Many classrooms and equipment do not meet standards for the needs of children with special needs, affecting safety and comfort.	Experiences limitations in using classrooms or equipment that do not meet standards, which hinders safe and comfortable learning activities.
Limited Government Support	Relies on government support, which is often insufficient to meet the needs of inclusive facilities.	Lack of adequate government-provided facilities often prevents educators from offering optimal services to children with special needs.
Lack of Community Understanding	The community, especially parents, often lacks understanding of the importance of special attention for children with special needs, hindering policy implementation.	Frequently needs to educate parents on the importance of special approaches and inclusive policies, which consumes educators' time and energy in communication.

Challenge Indicator	Challenges Faced by Principals	Challenges Faced by Educators
Parental Misunderstandings	Parents may not fully understand or support the need for adapted learning environments for children with special needs, making it difficult to create an inclusive environment.	Parents tend to expect children with special needs to follow the same learning methods, requiring educators to continuously explain the importance of special approaches.
Intensive Communication Needs	Principals need to maintain communication with external parties to secure more support in providing adequate facilities.	Educators often have to explain inclusive policies to parents and the community to convey the importance of specialized approaches for children with special needs.

Table 3 shows that principals primarily face challenges related to budget and facility provision, while educators focus more on social challenges and communication with parents and the community to explain inclusive policies. The challenges principals and educators face in implementing the learning environment safety policy are deeply interconnected, affecting each other in significant ways. Principals, dealing with limited budgets and inadequate facilities, struggle to provide the specialized infrastructure needed for children with special needs, directly impacting educators' ability to create an inclusive classroom environment. Without the proper resources, educators cannot fully implement inclusive teaching practices, making it difficult for children with special needs to receive the support they need (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). At the same time, educators face social challenges, particularly in educating parents and the community about the importance of tailored approaches for these children. When parents fail to understand or support these efforts, it can hinder the educators' ability to create a safe and inclusive learning space. This creates a cycle where principals' difficulties in securing necessary resources compound educators' challenges in gaining parental support, making it crucial to address both the logistical and social aspects of inclusive education simultaneously for a truly safe and inclusive environment (Tsirantonaki & Vlachou, 2024; Ummah et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals progress and challenges in implementing learning environment safety policies in inclusive early childhood education (ECED) institutions in Banjarmasin and Banjarbaru. While efforts have been made to create safe and inclusive spaces, barriers remain, particularly in infrastructure, teacher training, and community awareness. Principals and educators recognize the importance of physical and emotional safety, but many institutions lack adequate resources. These findings align with SDG 4.a, emphasizing safe, inclusive learning environments, yet policy implementation remains inconsistent due to limited government support and community understanding. This study has limitations, including its focus on two cities and a sample of 20 institutions, which may not fully represent Indonesia's diverse educational contexts. Future research should explore regional comparisons and longitudinal studies to assess policy impact over time. This study contributes to the development of inclusive education policies, supporting safer learning environments for all children.

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